

T Subba Row Garu

The Twelve Signs of the Zodiac

First published in: *The Theosophist*, Vol. III (No. 2), November 1881, pp. 41-44. Numerous reprints in: *Five Years of Theosophy*, *The Esoteric Writings of T. Subba Row*, Theosophical Publishing House (Adyar) Pamphlet No. 31, and by independent publishers including Wizards Bookshelf, Minneapolis 1975, under their "Secret Doctrine Reference Series."

H.P. Blavatsky as Editor of *The Theosophist* appended notes to certain statements by the author: they have been repr. in: *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, III pp. 325-27, and are here placed in bold blue to differentiate them from the author's footnotes.

THE division of the Zodiac into different signs dates from immemorial antiquity. It has acquired a world-wide celebrity and is to be found in the astrological systems of several nations. The invention of the Zodiac and its signs has been assigned to different nations by different antiquarians. It is stated by some that, at first, there were only ten signs, that one of these signs was subsequently split up into two separate signs, and that a new sign was added to the number to render the esoteric significance of the division more profound and at the same time to conceal it more perfectly from the uninitiated public. It is very probable that the real philosophical conception of the division owes its origin to some particular nation, and the names given to the various signs might have been translated into the languages of other nations. The principal object of this article, however, is not to decide which nation had the honour of inventing the signs in question, but to indicate to *some extent* the real philosophical meaning involved therein and the way to discover the rest of the meaning which yet remains undisclosed. But from what is herein stated, an inference may fairly be drawn that, like so many other philosophical myths and allegories, the invention of the Zodiac and its signs owes its origin to ancient India.

What then is the real origin of these signs, the philosophical conception which the Zodiac and its signs are intended to represent? Do the various signs merely represent the shape or configuration of the different constellations included in the divisions, or are they simply masks designed to veil some hidden meaning? The former supposition is altogether untenable for two reasons, viz.: —

I. The Hindoos were acquainted with the precession of the equinoxes as may be easily seen from their works on Astronomy and from the almanacs published by Hindu astronomers. Consequently they were fully aware of the fact that the constellations in the various Zodiacal divisions were not fixed. They could not, therefore, have assigned particular shapes to these shifting groups of fixed stars with reference to the divisions of the Zodiac. But the names indicating the Zodiacal signs have been allowed to remain unaltered. It is to be inferred, therefore, that the names given to the



various signs have no connection whatever with the configurations of the constellations included in them.

II. The names assigned to these signs by the ancient Sanskrit writers and their exoteric or literal meanings are as follows: —

| | The names of the signs | Their exoteric or literal meanings |
|----|-------------------------------|---|
| 1 | Māsham | Ram or <i>Aries</i> . |
| 2 | Rishabham | Bull or <i>Taurus</i> . |
| 3 | Mithunam | Twins or <i>Gemini</i> (male and female). |
| 4 | Karkātacam | <i>Cancer</i> or Crab. |
| 5 | Simham | Lion or <i>Leo</i> . |
| 6 | Kanyā | <i>Virgo</i> ¹ or Virgin. |
| 7 | Thula | <i>Libra</i> or Balance. |
| 8 | Vrischikam | <i>Scorpion</i> . |
| 9 | Thanus | <i>Sagittarius</i> or Archer. |
| 10 | Makaram | <i>Capricornus</i> or Crocodile. |
| 11 | Kumbham | <i>Aquarius</i> or Water-bearer. |
| 12 | Meenam | <i>Pisces</i> or Fish. |

The figures of the constellations, included in the signs at the time the division was first made do not at all resemble the shapes of the animals, reptiles and other objects denoted by the names given them. The truth of this assertion can be ascertained by examining the configurations of the various constellations. Unless the shape of the crocodile² or the crab is called up by the observer's imagination, there is very little chance of the stars themselves suggesting to his idea that figure, upon the blue canopy of the starry firmament.

If, then, the constellations have nothing to do with the origin of the names by which the Zodiacal divisions are indicated, we have to seek for some other source which might have given rise to these appellations. It becomes my object to unravel a portion of the mystery connected with these Zodiacal signs, as also to disclose a portion of the sublime conception of the ancient Hindu philosophy which gave rise to them. The signs of the Zodiac have more than one meaning. From one point of view they represent the different stages of creation up to the time the present material universe with the five elements came into phenomenal existence. As the author of "Isis Unveiled"

¹ **Virgo-Scorpio, when none but the initiates knew there were twelve signs. Virgo-Scorpio was then followed for the profane by *Sagittarius*. At the middle or junction-point where now stands *Libra*, and at the sign now [so] called which follows *Virgo*, two mystical signs were inserted which remained unintelligible to the profane. — ED. THEOS.**

² **This constellation was never called Crocodile by the Western ancient astronomers who described it as a horned goat and called it so — *Capricornus*. — ED. THEOS.**



has stated in the second volume of her admirable work, “the key should be turned *Seven times*” to understand the whole philosophy underlying these signs. But I shall wind it only once and give the contents of the *first chapter* of the History of Creation. It is very fortunate that the Sanskrit names assigned to the various divisions by the Aryan philosophers contain within themselves the key to the solution of the problem. Those of my readers who have studied to some extent the ancient “Mantra” and the “Tantra Sastras” of India, would have seen that very often Sanskrit words are made to convey a certain hidden meaning by means of certain well-known prearranged methods and a tacit convention, while their literal significance is something quite different from the implied meaning. The following are some of the rules which may help an inquirer in ferreting out the deep significance of the ancient Sanskrit nomenclature used in the old Aryan myths and allegories: —

1. Find out the synonyms of the word used which have other meanings.
2. Find out the numerical value of the letters composing the word according to the methods given in ancient Tantrik works.
3. Examine the ancient myths or allegories, if there are any, which have any special connection with the word in question.
4. Permute the different syllables composing the word and examine the new combinations that will thus be formed and their meanings, &c, &c.

I shall now apply some of the above given rules to the names of the twelve signs of the Zodiac.

I. Māsham. One of the synonyms of this word is *Aja*. Now, *Aja* literally means that which has no birth and is applied to the Eternal Brahman in certain portions of the Upanishads. So the first sign is intended to represent *Parabrahmam*, the self-existent, eternal, self-sufficient cause of creation.

II. Rishabham. This word is used in several places in the Upanishads and the Veda to mean *Pranava* (Aum). Sankaracharya has so interpreted it in several portions of his commentary. Example: “*Rishabhasya — Chandasam Rishabhasya Pradhanasya Pranavasya.*”

III. Mithunam. As the word plainly indicates, this sign is intended to represent the first androgyne, the *Arthanāreeswara*, the bi-sexual Sephira-Adam Kadmon.

IV. Karkātacam. When the syllables are converted into the corresponding numbers according to the general mode of transmutation so often alluded to in Mantra Shastra, the word in question will be represented by *////*. This sign then is evidently intended to represent the sacred *Tetragram*; the *Parabrahmathāracam*; the *Pranava* resolved into four separate entities corresponding to its *four Matras*; *the four Avasthas* indicated by Jāgrath (waking) Avastha, Swapna (Dreamy) Avastha, Shushupti (deep sleep) Avastha, and Thureea (the last stage, *i.e.*, Nirvana) Avastha (as yet in potentiality); *the four states of Brahman* called Vyswānara, Thyjasa (or Hiranyagarbha), Pragna, and Eswara and represented by Brahma, Vishnā, Mahāswara, and Sadasiva; *the four aspects of Parabrahmam* as Stoolam, Sookshmam, Beejam and Sakshi; *the four stages or*



conditions of the Sacred Word named Para, Pasyanti, Mathyama and Vykhari: *Nadam, Bindu, Sakti and Kala*. This sign completes the first quaternary.

V. Simham. This word contains a world of occult meaning within itself: and it may not be prudent on my part to disclose the whole of its meaning in this article. It will be sufficient for the purpose of this article to give a general indication of its significance.

Two of its synonymous terms are *Panchāsyam* and *Hari*, and its number in the order of the Zodiacal divisions (being the fifth sign) points clearly to the former synonym. This synonym — *Panchāsyam* — shows that the sign is intended to represent *the five Brahmas, viz., — Esānam, Aghoram, Tatpurusham, Vāmadāvam, and Sadyojātam — the five Buddhas*. The second synonym shows it to be *Nārāyana*, the *Jeevātma* or *Pratyagātma*. (The *Sukarahasy Upanishad* will show that the ancient Aryan philosophers looked upon *Nārāyana* as the *Jeevātma*.³ The *Vyshnavites* may not admit it. But as an *Advyti*, I look upon *Jeevātma* as identical with *Paramātma* in its real essence when stripped of its fictitious attributes created by *Agnānam* or *Avidya* — ignorance). The *Jeevātma* is correctly placed in the fifth sign counting from *Māsham*, as the fifth sign is the *putrasthanam* or the son's house according to the rules of Hindu astrology. The sign in question represents *Jeevātma* — the son of *Paramātma* as it were. (I may also add that it represents the real Christ, the anointed pure spirit, though the missionaries may frown at this interpretation.)⁴ I will only add here that unless the nature of this sign is fully comprehended it will be impossible to understand the real order of the next three signs and their full significance. The elements or entities that have merely a potential existence in this sign become distinct, separate entities in the next three signs. Their union into a single entity leads to the destruction of the phenomenal universe, and the recognition of the pure spirit and their separation has the contrary effect. It leads to material earth-bound existence and brings into view the picture gallery of *Avidya* (Ignorance), or *Maya* (Illusion). If the real orthography of the name by which the sign in question is indicated is properly understood it will readily be seen that the next three signs are not what they ought to be. *Kanyā* or *Virgo* and *Vrischikam* or *Scorpio* should form one single sign, and *Thula* must follow the said sign if it is at all necessary to have a separate sign of that name. But a separation between *Kanyā* and *Vrischikam* was effected by interposing the sign *Thula* between the two. The object of this separation will be understood on examining the meaning of the three signs.

VI. Kanyā. — Means a virgin and represents *Sakti* or *Mahāmāya*. The sign in question is the 6th *Rāsi* or division and indicates that there are six primary

³ In its lowest or most material state, as the life-principle which animates the material bodies of the animal and vegetable worlds, etc. — ED. THEOS.

⁴ Nevertheless it is a true one. The *Jivatma* in the *Microcosm* (man) is the same spiritual essence which animates the *Macrocosm* (universe), the differentiation, or specific difference between the two *Jivatmas* presenting itself but in the two states or conditions of the same and one Force. Hence, "this son of *Paramatma*" is an eternal correlation of the *Father-Cause*, *Purusha* manifesting himself as *Brahmā* of the "golden egg" and becoming *Viraj* — the universe. We are "all born of *Aditi*, from the water" (*Rig-Veda*, Hymns to the *Maruts*, Bk. X, Hymn 63, 2), and "Being was born from non-being" (*ibid.*, *Mandala I*, *Sukta 164*, 6). — ED. THEOS.



forces in nature. These forces have different sets of names in Sanskrit philosophy. According to one system of nomenclature they are called by the following names: (1) Parāsakti; (2) Gnānasakti; (3) Itchāsakti (will-power); (4) Kriyāsakti; (5) Kundalinisakti and (6) Mathrukāsakti.⁵ The six forces are in their unity represented by the *Astral light*.⁶

VII. Thula. — When represented by numbers according to the method above alluded to, this word will be converted into 36. This sign, therefore, is evidently intended to represent the *36 Tatwams*. (The number of Tatwams is different according to the views of different philosophers; but by Saktāyās generally and by several of the ancient Rishis such as Agasthya, Thoorwāsa and Parasurāma &c., the number of Tatwams has been stated to be 36.) Jeevātma differs from Paramātma, or to state the same thing in other words, “Baddha” differs from “Mukta”⁷ in being encased as it were within these 36 Tatwams, while the other is free. This sign prepares the way to earthly Adam, to Nara. As the emblem of Nara it is properly placed as the seventh sign.

⁵ *Parasakti*: — Literally the great or supreme force or power. It means and includes *the powers of light and heat*.

Gnānasakti: — Literally the power of intellect or the power of real wisdom or knowledge. It has two aspects :

I. The following are some of its manifestations *when placed under the influence or control of material conditions*:

(a) The power of the mind in interpreting our sensations, (b) Its power in recalling past ideas (memory), and raising future expectations, (c) Its power as exhibited in what are called by modern psychologists “the laws of association” which enables it to form *persisting* connections between various groups of sensations and possibilities of sensations and thus generate the notion or idea of an external object. (d) Its power in connecting our ideas together by the mysterious link of memory and thus generating the notion of self or individuality.

II. The following are some of its manifestations *when liberated from the bonds of matter*. —

(a) Clairvoyance. (b) Psychometry.

Itchāsakti: — Literally, *the power of the will*. Its *most ordinary manifestation* is the generation of certain nerve currents which set in motion such muscles as are required for the accomplishment of the desired object.

Kriyāsakti: — The mysterious power of thought which enables it to produce external, perceptible, phenomenal results by its own inherent energy. The ancients held that any idea will manifest itself *externally* if one’s attention is deeply concentrated upon it. Similarly an intense volition will be followed by the desired result. A Yogi generally performs his wonders by means of Itchāsakti and Kriyāsakti.

Kundalinisakti: — Literally, the power or force which moves in a serpentine or curved path. It is the universal life-principle which everywhere manifests itself in nature. This force includes in itself the two great forces of attraction and repulsion. Electricity and magnetism are but manifestations of it. This is the power or force which brings about that “continuous adjustment of *internal relations to external relations*,” which is the essence of life according to Herbert Spencer, and that “continuous adjustment of *external relations to internal relations*,” which is the basis of transmigration of souls or *punarjanmam* (re-birth) according to the doctrines of the ancient Hindu philosophers.

A Yogi must thoroughly subjugate this power or force before he can attain moksham. This force is, in fact, the great serpent of the Bible.

Mathrukāsakti: — Literally, the force or power of letters or speech or music. The whole of the ancient Mantra Shastra has this force or power in all its manifestations for its subject-matter. The power of The Word of which Jesus Christ speaks of is a manifestation of this Sakti. The influence of music is one of its ordinary manifestations. The power of the mirific ineffable Name is the crown of this Sakti.

Modern science has but partly investigated the first, second and fifth of the forces or powers above-named, but it is altogether in the dark as regards the remaining powers.

⁶ **Even the very name of *Kanya* (Virgin) shows how all the ancient esoteric systems agreed in all their fundamental doctrines. The Kabalists and the Hermetic philosophers call the Astral Light the “heavenly or celestial Virgin.” The Astral Light in its unity is the 7th. Hence the seven principles diffused in every unity, or the 6 and ONE — two triangles and a crown. — ED. THEOS.**

⁷ **As the Infinite differs from the Finite and the Unconditioned from the Conditioned. — ED. THEOS.**



VIII. *Vrischikam*. — It is stated by ancient philosophers that the sun when located in this Rāsi or division is called by the name of *Vishnu* (See the 12th Skandha of Bhāgavata). This sign is intended to represent Vishnu. Vishnu literally means *that which is expanded* — expanded as *Vishwam* or *Universe*. Properly speaking, Vishwam itself is Vishnu. (See Sankarācharya's commentary on Vishnusahasranaman.) I have already intimated that Vishnu represents the *Swapnāvastha* or the *Dreamy State*. The sign in question properly signifies the universe in thought or the universe in the divine conception.

It is properly placed as the sign opposite to Rishabham or Pranava. Analysis from Pranava downwards leads to the Universe of Thought, and synthesis from the latter upwards leads to Pranava (Aum). We have now arrived at the ideal state of the universe previous to its coming into material existence. The expansion of the Beejam or primitive germ into the universe is only possible when the 36 “Tatwams”⁸ are interposed between the Māya and Jeevātma. The dreamy state is induced through the instrumentality of these “Tatwams.” It is the existence of these Tatwams that brings *Hamsa* into existence. The elimination of these Tatwams marks the beginning of the synthesis towards Pranava and Brahman and converts *Hamsa* into *Sōham*. As it is intended to represent the different stages of creation from Brahman downwards to the material universe, the three signs Kanyā, Thula and Vrischikam, are placed in the order in which they now stand as three separate signs.

IX. *Thanus* (Sagittarius). When represented in numbers, the name is equivalent to 9, and the division in question is the 9th division counting from Māsham. The sign, therefore, clearly indicates the 9 *Brahmas* — the 9 Prajāpatis who assisted the Demiurgus in constructing the material universe.

X. *Makaram*. There is some difficulty in interpreting this word; nevertheless it contains within itself the clue to its correct interpretation. The letter *Ma* is equivalent to number 5 and *Kara* means hand. Now in Sanskrit *Thribhujam* means a triangle, *bhujam* or *karam* (both are synonymous) being understood to mean a side. So, *Makaram* or *Panchakaram* means a *Pentagon*.⁹

Now, *Makaram* is the tenth sign and the term “Thasathisa” generally used by Sanskrit writers to denote the faces or sides of the universe. The sign in question is intended to represent the faces of the universe and indicates that the figure of the universe is bounded by *Pentagons*. If we take the pentagons as regular pentagons (on the presumption or supposition that the universe is symmetrically constructed) the figure of the material universe will, of course, be a *Dodecahedron*, the geometrical model imitated by the Demiurgus in constructing the material universe. If *Thula* was subsequently invented and if instead of the three signs “Kanyā,” “Thula” and “Vrischikam,” there had existed

⁸ 36 is three times 12, or 9 Tetraktys, or 12 Triads, the most sacred numbers in the Kabalistic and Pythagorean numerals. — ED. THEOS.

⁹ See the article, in the August (1881) number, “The Five-Pointed Star,”* where we stated that the five-pointed star or pentagram represented the five limbs of man. — ED. THEOS.

* Cf. *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, III pp. 250-54. — Boris de Zirkoff; also cf. THE SIX-POINTED AND FIVE-POINTED STAR, *ibid.* pp. 313-23 — ED. PHIL.



formerly only one sign combining in itself Kanyā and Vrischikam, the sign now under consideration was the eighth sign under the old system, and it is a significant fact that Sanskrit writers generally speak also of “Ashtathisa” or eight faces bounding space. It is quite possible that the number of *thisa* might have been altered from 8 to 10 when the formerly existing Virgo-Scorpio was split up into three separate signs.

Again, *Kara* may be taken to represent the projecting triangles of the star-shaped figure so often alluded to in the columns of this journal in connection with Scorpion-sting. This figure may also be called a kind of regular pentagon (see, Todhunter’s *Spherical Trigonometry*, p.143). If this interpretation is accepted, the Rasi or sign in question represents the “Microcosm.” But the “microcosm” or the world of thought is really represented by *Vrischikam*. From an objective point of view the “microcosm” is represented by the human body. *Makaram* may be taken to represent simultaneously both the microcosm and the macrocosm, as external objects of perception.

In connection with this sign I shall state herein a few important facts which I beg to submit for the consideration of those who are interested in examining the ancient occult sciences of India. It is generally held by the ancient philosophers that the macrocosm is similar to the microcosm in having a *Stoola Sariram* and a *Sooksma Sariram*. The visible universe is the *Stoola Sariram* of Viswam; the ancient philosophers held that as a substratum for this visible universe, there is another universe — perhaps we may call it the universe of Astral Light — the real universe of Noumena, the soul as it were of this visible universe. It is darkly hinted in certain passages of the Veda and the Upanishads that this hidden universe of Astral Light is to be represented by an *Icosahedron*. The connection between an Icosahedron and a Dodecahedron is something very peculiar and interesting though the figures seem to be so very dissimilar to each other. The connection may be understood by the undermentioned geometrical construction. Describe a Sphere about an Icosahedron; let perpendiculars be drawn from the centre of the Sphere on its faces and produced to meet the surface of the Sphere. Now, if the points of intersection be joined, a Dodecahedron is formed within the Sphere. By a similar process an Icosahedron may be constructed from a Dodecahedron. (See Todhunter’s *Spherical Trigonometry*, p. 141: art 193.) The figure constructed as above described will represent the universe of matter and the universe of Astral Light as they actually exist. I shall not now, however, proceed to show how the universe of Astral Light may be considered in the light of an Icosahedron. I shall only state here that this conception of the Aryan philosophers is not to be looked upon as mere “theological twaddle” or as the outcome of wild fancy. The real significance of the conception in question can, I believe, be explained by reference to the psychology and the physical science of the ancients. But I must stop here and proceed to consider the meaning of the remaining two signs.

XI. *Kumbhum* — (or *Aquarius*). When represented by numbers, the word is equivalent to 14. It can be easily perceived then that the division in question is



intended to represent the “Chaturdasa Bhuvanam” or the 14 lokams spoken of in Sanskrit books.

XII. *Meenam* (or Pisces). This word again is represented by 5 when written in numbers and is evidently intended to convey the idea of *Panchamahabhutams* or the 5 *elements*. The sign also suggests that water (not the ordinary water but the universal solvent of the ancient alchemists) is the most important amongst the said elements.

I have now finished the task which I have set to myself in this article. My purpose is not to explain the ancient theory of creation itself, but to show the connection between that theory and the Zodiacal divisions. I have herein brought to light but a very small portion of the philosophy imbedded in these signs. The veil that was dexterously thrown over certain portions of the mystery connected with these signs by the ancient philosophers *will never be lifted up for the amusement or edification of the uninitiated public.*

Now to summarise the facts stated in this article, the contents of the first chapter of the history of this universe are as follows: —

- (1). The self-existent, eternal Brahman.
- (2). Pranava (Aum).
- (3). The androgyne Brāhm, or the bisexual Sephira -Adam Kadmon.
- (4). The Sacred Tetragram — the four mātras of Pranava — the four avasthas — the four states of Brahman — the Sacred Thāracam.
- (5). The five Brahmas — the five Buddhas — representing in their totality the Jeevatma.
- (6). The astral light — the holy virgin — the six forces in nature.
- (7). The thirty-six Tatwams born of Avidya.
- (8). The universe in thought — the Swapna Avastha — the microcosm looked at from a subjective point of view.
- (9). The nine Prajapatis — the assistants of the Demiurgus.¹⁰
- (10). The shape of the material universe in the mind of the Demiurgus — the DODECAHEDRON.
- (11). The fourteen lokams.
- (12). The five elements.

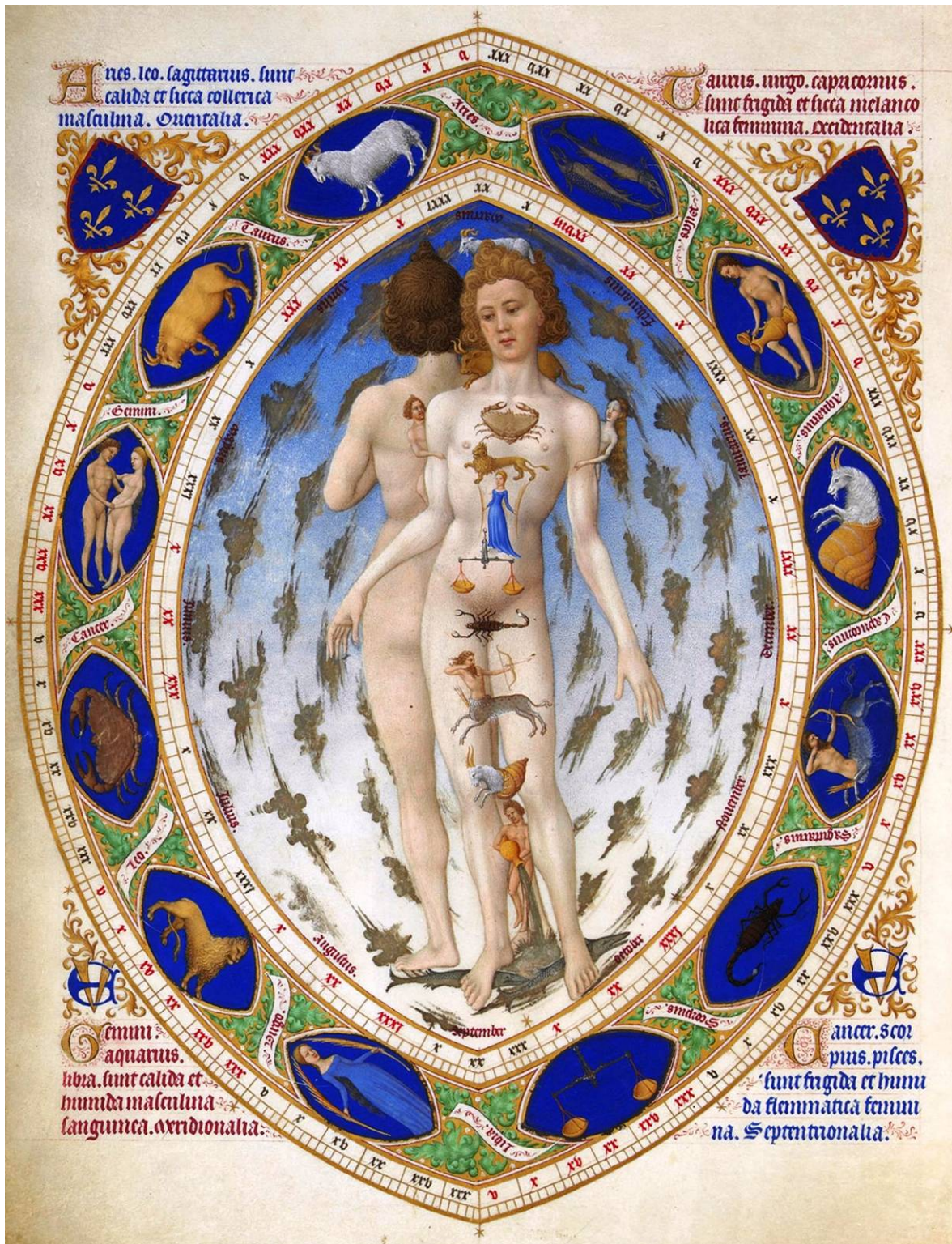
The history of creation and of this world from its beginning up to the present time is composed of *Seven* chapters. The *Seventh* chapter is not yet completed.

Triplicane, Madras, 14th September, 1881.

¹⁰ The nine Kabalistic Sephiroth, emanated from Sephira the 10th, and the head Sephiroth are identical. Three trinities or triads with their emanative principle form the Pythagorean mystic *Decad*, the sum of *all* which represents the whole *Kosmos*. — ED. THEOS.



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